

High-level US delegation to Taiwan fuels tensions with China

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The arrival of a US delegation in Taipei on Sunday evening, just a day after Taiwan's elections, is a deliberately provocative move by the US designed to further heighten conflicts with China. While the delegation is described as unofficial, the American Institute in Taiwan, Washington's de facto embassy in Taipei, said the Biden administration had asked its participants to travel to Taiwan, supposedly "in their private capacity."

The bipartisan delegation is headed by former National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley and former Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg. They met with the current Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen and president-elect William Lai Ching-te. Both Tsai and Lai are from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which has fuelled tensions with Beijing by promoting independence from China and strengthening ties with the US.

Meeting with Tsai on Monday, Hadley heaped praise on Taiwan's democracy as a "shining example for the world." He reaffirmed that "the American commitment to Taiwan is rock solid, principled and bipartisan," adding "we look forward to continuity in the relationship between Taiwan and the United States under the new administration."

The choice of the words "rock solid" is deliberate. It is a reference to repeated comments by President Joseph Biden that the US would unequivocally support Taiwan in any conflict with China. Biden's remarks effectively end the longstanding US policy of "strategic ambiguity," leaving open the question of whether or not Washington would back Taiwan in all circumstances. The aim of "strategic ambiguity" was not only to rein in Beijing, but to prevent Taipei from declaring formal independence—a move that China has warned would provoke war.

"Strategic ambiguity" was a corollary of the "One China policy" that has formed the basis for US-China relations since 1979, when Washington established diplomatic relations with Beijing and cut all ties with Taipei. De-facto, the US recognised Beijing as the legitimate government of all China including Taiwan, while opposing any forcible reunification of the island with the mainland.

Biden, following Donald Trump, has deliberately aggravated tensions with China over Taiwan by all but tearing up the One China policy. His administration has ended diplomatic protocols limiting high-level visits, boosted arms sales and increased provocative US naval passages through the narrow Taiwan Strait separating Taiwan from the Chinese mainland.

Already at war with Russia in Ukraine and backing Israel's genocide in Gaza, the Biden administration is deliberately goading China into seizing Taiwan. These expanding conflicts and confrontations are increasingly assuming the shape of a devastating world war to shore up the global hegemony of US imperialism.

Lai pledged in the course of the election campaign to maintain the previous policy of president Tsai toward China: simply stating that Taiwan was already independent and therefore there was no need to formally declare independence. Having secured election, Lai, who has previously described himself as "a pragmatic worker for independence," may not adhere to that policy, further provoking Beijing.

The lack of formal independence has diplomatic as well as economic consequences. Taiwan has no seat in the UN nor in a host of other international bodies, including the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. It has diplomatic relations with only a small number of nations. That fell to 12 after Nauru announced on Monday that it was switching its

diplomatic ties from Taipei to Beijing.

Lai met with the US delegation at the DPP headquarters, where he declared that freedom and democracy were “the most valuable assets for the Taiwanese people” and “core values” shared by Taiwan and the United States. He praised the delegation’s visit as “meaningful” and a demonstration of the strength of the partnership between Taiwan and the US.

All the paeans to “democracy” ignore the fact that for decades the US supported the brutal dictatorship established by the Kuomintang (KMT), which fled the mainland after the 1949 Chinese Revolution and ruled Taiwan under martial law until 1987. While elections are now held, the state apparatus of the dictatorship has not undergone any fundamental reform.

Lai’s “victory” in last Saturday’s election may well turn out to be pyrrhic. He won the presidency in a first-past-the-post vote with just 40.1 percent of ballots cast. He is the first to win the presidency on less than 50 percent. His two opponents—Hou Yu-ih from the KMT and Ko Wen-je from the Taiwan People’s Party (TPP)—both favoured an easing of tensions with China and received a combined vote of 59.9 percent.

Moreover, the DPP lost control of the 113-seat Legislative Yuan. The KMT now holds 52 seats, the DPP 51 seats and the TPP 8 seats. The KMT declared on Tuesday it would “definitely fulfil the role of largest party” in parliament and “exert the strongest supervisory power.”

Lai is not due to be inaugurated until May 20, but the Taiwanese premier, Chen Chien-jen, announced on Tuesday that the current cabinet will resign prior to a meeting of the new cabinet on February 1. Under the constitution, the president appoints the premier, who appoints the cabinet. The potential exists for a standoff between the president and parliament.

The new administration also faces rising social tensions. Election period polling revealed that the top concern nominated was not China but rather deteriorating living conditions. Slow economic growth, a lack of jobs, low wages and rising prices, especially for housing, have all contributed to falling support for the DPP, which has been in power for eight years. Many voters, particularly youth, are alienated from both the DPP and KMT and have turned to the newly-established TPP to at least register their opposition.

The island’s developing social and political crisis is compounded by the growing dangers of a US-provoked war with China. A worried editorial in the *Financial Times* on Monday appealed for moderation on both sides of Taiwan Strait, which it described as “one of the world’s most dangerous flashpoints.” After calling on Beijing and Taipei to take steps to dampen tensions, it declared:

“The US should carefully calibrate its official communications on Taiwan, taking care not to goad Beijing unnecessarily. The current geopolitical balance around Taiwan is both incendiary and fragile. But it remains immeasurably preferable to the alternative: the eruption of conflict across the straits that could escalate into superpower war.”

Washington, however, has no intention of dialling back its provocations against Beijing, particularly over Taiwan. US imperialism will stop at nothing to end what it regards as the chief threat to its global domination—China’s economic rise—and will intensify its reckless confrontation with Beijing throughout the Indo Pacific and internationally.



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